

Fictions of Production: Misattribution, Prosopopoeia, and the Early Modern Woman Writer

Rosalind Smith
University of Newcastle
Newcastle, Australia

Our understanding of what early modern women wrote, how they circulated their works, and how those works have been read is underpinned by narratives of neglect and loss. Jennifer Summit has argued that the idea of loss “has served as a powerful fiction that shaped the cultural place of the woman writer as well as the abstract model of a literary history that excluded her.”¹ She demonstrates the ways in which the figure of the woman writer was constructed at different historical moments, becoming a central enabling mechanism for Protestant vernacular canon formation in the sixteenth century, only to be excluded from later seventeenth-century literary histories. This work has been extended by Marie-Louise Coolahan, whose work on missing texts, attributed to early modern Catholic women writers but now lost, further complicates the ways in which fictions of the early modern woman writer’s loss and neglect might be seen to function in the early modern period.² Coolahan’s focus on the reception histories of these lost texts opens up new possibilities for approaching early modern women’s writing, arguing that the channels through which women’s texts were read and their authorial reputations were disseminated are central to understanding not only how, what, and where women wrote, but also how their texts found audiences and the ways in which female authorship was imagined. This article builds upon this work surrounding reception and the figure of the early modern woman writer to consider the obverse of fictions of loss and neglect. It examines textual instances where women’s writing has been “found” or manufactured, falsely or tenuously attributed to historical women and circulated under their signatures as their voices.³ These fictions of production circulated as prosopopoeiae within women’s lifetimes, along-

side writers' own histories of scribal and print textual production, as well as in the centuries following their deaths in the service of editorial, antiquarian, and historical projects. I argue that these fictions of voice and agency as well as production also have a significant role in the construction of the early modern woman writer and her participation in English literary history. False attribution and over-attribution informed women's own textual practice, their modes of circulation, the reception of their "works," and the production of reputation. Only partially acknowledged, these narratives continue to shape our understanding of what early modern women wrote and the uses to which their texts were put, as well as how women were imagined in formations of English literary history.

Like anonymous texts, instances of wishful or false attribution are unsettling. They resist the kinds of research predicated on reliable connections between a historical woman writer and the production of a text, disrupting projects of recovery and posing difficult methodological questions for the field of early modern women's writing. As Danielle Clarke has argued, the establishment of a corpus of early modern women's texts through editing and anthologizing has been underwritten by "a nostalgic desire for stable texts," coupled with an equally strong desire for stable attributions.⁴ In early projects recovering women's writing, this desire for reliable connections between a female author and her texts produced two opposed but equally problematic responses to texts that falsely circulated under female signatures: either they were straightforwardly attributed to women writers, even on scant or dubious evidence, or they were absolutely excluded from the canon of women's writing. Fictions of production have either been co-opted into the canon or expelled from it, with neither response representing the whole story of these texts' conditions of production, circulation, and reception. There have been exceptions to this binary, of course, first mediated through poststructuralist formulations of author function rather than author, pressing at the boundaries of how "women's writing" might be defined.⁵ However, this first tranche of theoretically informed, expanded definitions of authorship has had little critical traction when it comes to what is largely read, taught, and analyzed as early modern women's writing—in part because of feminist investments in recovery, but equally due to the critically problematic status of all anonymous or pseudonymous texts. As Marcy North comments, "[E]specially in criticism of print-era literature, scholars have traditionally preferred works with authors," with most early modern anonymous texts either "assigned a conjectural author or forgotten."⁶ Although the editors of the comprehensive edition of the works of

Elizabeth I, for example, acknowledge the “complex coproduction” of much of her writing, especially in the case of poetry transmitted through manuscripts, they also silently exclude some texts circulated under her signature, presumably on the grounds that they did not meet the criteria of “texts we judge reliable.”⁷ Such decisions mean that the *Collected Works* includes the lost verses “Written on a Window frame at Woodstock,” but not the sonnet attributed to the queen in John Soowthern’s *Pandora*, nor the quatrain she transcribed and signed on the flyleaf of her New Testament.⁸ Such covert elision of works means that the corpus of women’s writing is haunted by this shadowy body of texts, circulated under women’s signatures, read as their voice during their lifetimes and beyond, yet acknowledged only with difficulty within current critical paradigms because of their uncertain origins. They remain on the periphery, not quite fitting into canons of writing by men or by women.

More recently, however, the intersection of feminist literary history with studies of the material cultures of textual production and scholarship of the history of the book has produced expanded models of authorship, moving beyond the idea of early modern women as writers of single-authored, “original” texts to encompass a range of textual roles, from scribe, compiler, annotator, and translator to editor, printer, publisher, and patron.⁹ Alongside this wider understanding of women as textual agents has been a new recognition of the ways in which reading and writing were connected in the period, understanding reading’s continuity with writing through practices such as annotation, translation, and transcription. These formulations mobilize an active model of reception that dovetails with Foucauldian ideas of the author function, where gender is attached to a text by its readers and writers contingently, in specific moments of reception or production, rather than in fixed and stable ways. If, as Patricia Phillippy warns, this approach has its dangers, constituting “a situational contingency that threatens to mark women’s writing as ‘occasional’ in a pejorative sense,” it also opens up possibilities for thinking further about how the attribution of texts to women might function.¹⁰ Rather than subsuming instances of unstable authorship beneath those of stable authorship or vice versa, such categories might be understood to coexist in the period and beyond. “True,” “false,” and indeterminate attributions exist on a spectrum of authorship ascription that studies of manuscript compilations have shown to be variably applied by early modern subjects themselves to the same texts. Such an approach does not seek to replace narratives of early modern women’s known textual agency with a “disjointed record of textual dispersal” dismantling the recov-

ery of early modern women's writing just as it gains complexity and scale.¹¹ Instead, it sees the historical, anonymous, and fictional woman writer as coexisting in the reader's imagination, both in the early modern period and beyond. Reputation becomes a useful vehicle for thinking through these complexities where the texts attributed to a woman writer because of her status might feed into both her own production of texts and the ways in which she was situated as a "writer" in the reader's mind. These overlapping authorial identities, with varying degrees of attachment to the historical female subject, coexisted for early modern readers and writers to create the author known as "Elizabeth I" or "Mary, Queen of Scots." This article takes these competing formulations of authorship for the early modern subject seriously, asking how texts attributed to women writers, especially those voiced but not written by them, informed those writers' own production of their authorial "names" and shaped their reception and reputation.

As Marcy North has shown, the boundary between naming and anonymity is a permeable one, as both conventions form "points in a narrative of paratextual functions through which is articulated the relationship between the text and its producers."¹² Mutually defining, the interconnection between these practices is exemplified through instances of false attribution, producing texts that are neither entirely anonymous nor fully attributed. The phenomenon of false attribution has a long history, located in the medieval period through the attribution of religious texts to biblical figures or church leaders in "pseudepigrapha." Often, anonymity is the condition through which the false attribution is made, importing the *auctoritas* of the named author to the text at the same time as the name of the attributor is occluded. The broader practice under which pseudepigrapha falls is prosopopeia, the rhetorical figure in which an imagined, absent, or dead person or thing is represented as speaking; or as Abraham Fraunce defines it, "*Prosopopeia* is a fayning of any person, when in our speech we represent the person of anie, and make it speake as though he were there present."¹³ Deriving via Latin from the Greek *prosōpopoia*, from *prosōpon* "person," and *poiein* "to make," it is a figure predicated upon the construction of identity through language and the idea of authorial identity as fiction.¹⁴ Lynn Enterline has expanded on the ways in which prosopopeia was fundamental to the training of orators in the humanist schoolroom, where students were directed in rhetorical exercises to place themselves in imaginative situations and create dramatic impersonations of historical or mythological subjects replete with tropes, while being self-conscious of the status of their performance as *imitatio*.¹⁵ The practice of prosopopeia was continuous across a range of

school exercises, from the acquisition of Latin and training in letter writing, often modeled on Ovid's *Heroides*, to instruction in the advanced rhetorical skill of declamation.¹⁶ Prosopopoeia's ubiquity within early modern culture was not restricted to the male students of the humanist classroom, however; its foundational texts were translated into the vernacular and circulated in oral, print, and manuscript cultures, and they were imitated in a variety of popular and elite forms from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, with the female-voiced complaints of the late Elizabethan period one of its most popular vernacular manifestations.¹⁷ Given the widespread practice of the figure and its availability for imitating the voices of historical and imaginary women, its connection to fictional attributions to early modern women has, surprisingly, only begun to be explored in terms of gender, authorship, and identity.¹⁸

When prosopopoeia has been considered in early modern women's writing, it has been co-opted by fictions of loss and neglect. In a groundbreaking early essay, Josephine Roberts explicitly considers examples of misattribution to early modern women writers, examining texts that circulated under the signatures of Anne Vavasour, Constantia Munda, and Mary Frith within the category of works of uncertain authorship. She points to the difficulties of incorporating such works into scholarly editions predicated on methodologies that require the precise determination of the author and argues that, although such textual examples are useful to understandings of "the broader social history of verse," ultimately their effect upon early modern women as writers has been negative. Arguing that "ventriloquized voices narrow the horizon of expectation for the reading public and reduce the range of authorial roles, before self-evident women's voices can fashion their own discourse," Roberts concludes that "the very popularity of such examples of the mimed, subordinated female voice may well have been a contributing factor in discouraging sixteenth-century Englishwomen from writing their own lyric poetry."¹⁹ Roberts's readings of prosopopoeia and the early modern woman writer are infused with a self-fulfilling narrative of obstruction, difficulty, and loss, forming the grounds upon which a deficit model of feminist literary history is constructed. Yet as the examples discussed in this essay will show, early modern women writers' relationship to prosopopoeia was more complex than the foreclosure of opportunity and a retreat from participation in lyric poetic forms. On the one hand, misattribution has worked to obscure the corpus of some of the women writers to whom multiple texts have been falsely assigned and has made their entry into the current canon of early modern women's writing more difficult.

Yet, as I will argue, in the case of Mary, Queen of Scots's poetry, instances of misattribution that circulated during her lifetime informed the media, forms, and topoi of her own writing. Rather than narrowing the horizons of possibility for her authorship, they provided generative narratives that she reused, resisted, or refigured. The imagined, prosopopoeic figure of "Mary, Queen of Scots" was as available to the historical woman writer of that name as to her impersonators, and, I suggest, was deployed to similar strategic effect in the service of her own religious and political programs. When Mary Stuart signed an anagram of her name to a sonnet, she used her signature to create a fictional identity for her own strategic purposes, in the same way that other writers framed texts she did not write through the use of her signature in attempts to renovate or destroy her reputation. Such "false" and "true" attributions and texts circulated simultaneously, calling into question the ways in which early modern readers distinguished between them and the significance that they attached to stable attributions. Prosopopoeic identity was available for imitation and use to all writers, culturally widespread and imaginatively deployed. Its ubiquity and flexibility formed part of the shifting economies of circulation and naming that existed in sixteenth-century textual cultures and was fundamental to how female voices and authorial identities were imagined and assigned.

One such circle of prosopopoeic textual transmission can be found in an English social and textual network surrounding Elizabeth I; Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford; his wife Anne Cecil de Vere, Countess of Oxford; and Anne Vavasour. A spectrum of attribution practices at work within this network demonstrate the availability of prosopopoeia as a flexible vehicle of impersonation as well as its complex connection to authorship. The most widely known of these poems is an early example of female complaint, "Sitting alone upon my thought in melancholye moode," dated by Steven May in his edition of Edward de Vere's poems to ca. 1581.²⁰ Listed by May as "possibly by Oxford," the poem is connected to the names of Edward de Vere and his mistress Anne Vavasour in different combinations in at least five manuscript copies.²¹ Folger Library MS V.a.89 associates the poem with the name "vavaser," which is subscribed beneath the transcription of the poem, as does British Library, Harley MS 7392, which subscribes the poem "A Vauasoare."²² The politics of naming around this poem become more complex when we consider that three manuscripts associate the poem with Oxford as well as Anne Vavasour: the Arundel Harington manuscript has the subscription "ffinis q^d E. Veer. Count d'Oxford" in Sir John Harington's hand, while two additional manuscripts, Bodleian Rawlinson poet.

MS 85 and Marsh's Library, Dublin, MS 183, identify the poem, respectively, as "verses made by the earle of Oxforde and M^{rs} Anne Vauesor" and "Verses made of y^e Earle of Ox^{en}forde And Mrs Ann vauesor."²³ In addition, the Bodleian manuscript prefaces the female speaker's first-person address, beginning at line eleven, as "An Vauesors. eccho," initially positioning her as author and speaker, and then, with the crossing out of her name as author, as speaker alone.

The inconsistency of the attributions surrounding the manuscript transcriptions of the poem indicates the ways in which authorship and voice were viewed as permeable, even interchangeable, by the poem's transcribers. The paratextual identifications of the poem's female speaker in four manuscripts as "vavaser," "A Vauasoare," "verses made by . . . M^{rs} Anne Vauesor," or "of Mrs Ann vauesor" indicate that readers of this text understood the female voice in the complaint to be Vavasour's, regardless of authorship. Yet the evidence for identifying her voice is supplied not only by naming the female speaker within the poem, but by identifying "vere" as her absent beloved through the device of echo: "O hevenes, quoth she, who was the firste that bred in me this fevere? vere." The first quatrain of the female lament repeats the name "vere" four times in response to the speaker's questions, disrupting the rhyme scheme of the text as a whole—which uses couplets of differing rhymes—to identify all the more emphatically the object of the female speaker's plaint. Vavasour comes to be identified as the plainant through her mediating role in the poem's explicit project of naming, a practice which is finally, perhaps strategically, attributed anonymously by the figure of Echo in the majority of the manuscript copies. Across this collection of manuscripts, Vavasour is both identified in terms of her voice, as speaker, and also as speaker and author, with authorial identifications also linked to her prosopoeic textual role. Prosopoeic and authorial identities coexist here, indicating how the practices of impersonation through speaking and through writing, "false" and "true" attributions, could be held simultaneously in the imaginations of a text's readers.

Such interplay between prosopoeic and authorial identifications in the text could, of course, be used for strategic effect. In its interrelated textual and paratextual identifications, this poem ascribes a social context through naming to an otherwise conventional lament, importing into the reader's understanding of the poem the major scandal of Edward de Vere's affair with Anne Vavasour, a Gentlewoman of the Bedchamber in Elizabeth's court.²⁴ In 1580, Vavasour delivered an illegitimate son and was immediately imprisoned in the Tower of London; this was her second pregnancy after

a miscarriage earlier in the year.²⁵ A letter from Francis Walsingham to the Earl of Huntingdon reveals Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, married since 1571 to William Cecil's daughter Anne, "to be the father, who hath withdrawn himself with intent, as it is thought, to pass the seas," with the ports closed to him to prevent his escape.²⁶ Oxford was apprehended and briefly incarcerated in the Tower, then held under house arrest for a short period and banned from court for two years.²⁷ The poem dramatizes the love affair underpinning these events through the female speaker's voice, overheard by the male narrator whose account frames her lament:

Sittinge alone upon my thought in melancholye moode,
 In sight of sea and at my backe an aunceyent, horye woode,
 I sawe a fayre yonge ladye come her secreate teares to wayle,
 Clad all in colour of a vowe and covered with a vayle.
 Yet for the daye was clere and calme, I might descerne her face,
 As one mighte see a damaske rose thoughe hid with cristall glasse.
 Three tymes with her softe hande full harde upon her heart she knockes,
 And sighte soe sore as mighte have moved some mercy in the rocks;
 From sighes and sheadinge amber teares into swete songe she brake,
 And thus the eccho answered her to every woorde she spake.

"O hevenes," quoth she, "who was the firste that in me this fevere?" vere
 "Who was the firste that gave the wounde whose scarre I were forever?" vere
 "What tyrant, Cupid, to my harmes usurpes thy golden quivere?" vere
 "What wighte first caught this hearte and can from bondage it deliver?" vere
 "Yet who dothe moste adore this wighte? O hollowe caves tell true," yowe
 "What nimphe deserves his likinge beste? yet doth in sorrowe rue?" yowe
 "What makes him not regarde good will with some remorse or ruthe?" youthe
 "What makes him shewe besides his birthe such pride and such untruthe?" youthe

"May I his beautye matche with love if he my love will trye?" I
 "May I requite his birthe with faythe? then faythfull will I dye." I
 And I that knewe this ladye well said lorde, how great a myracle,
 To heare the eccho tell her truthe as `twere Apollo's oracle./

Vavaser./

The fiction of discovery of the lady's "secreate teares" gives her song the effect of unmediated emotion, ostensibly constructed for no audience but herself. This truth effect is then amplified by the echo, "O hollowe caves tell true," supplying de Vere's name to associate the song with lived events as

well as providing evidence both for the speaker's constant love and for the careless lord's neglect, his "youth."²⁸ If this grounding of the song in lived experience is not evidence enough to create a sense of "truth," the male narrator closes it by asserting his intimacy with the speaker—"And I that knewe this ladye well"—and pointing out the truth-telling function of the echo, telling "her truthe as 'twere Apollo's oracle." The poem goes to great lengths to present a persuasive case associating its speakers with recognizable identities in the court, deploying a number of the conventions of female complaint that were to become ubiquitous in the 1590s in order to participate in the construction of the reputations of the figures involved.²⁹ The female speaker is represented as deserving and constant, making an effective case for her virtues of love and faith matching those of her partner's beauty and birth. The beloved is represented through her account less favorably, rejecting the lady without "remorse or ruth" and acting with "suche pride and such untruth," yet these faults are answered by the truth-telling echo's attribution of "youth" to his errors of judgment, ultimately redeemable through a change of heart and the acquisition of age.

This complaint is not one of passivity, then, but an exercise in the restoration of reputation and even a bid for the possibility of reunion. It takes the emerging tradition of vernacular female lament as found in Spenser's *Complaints*, and popular complaints such as *Shore's Wife* and Isabella Whitney's petition for her speaker's erotic reinstatement in *A Copy of a Letter*, in order to present a prosopopoeia of Vavasour's voice that recruits "truth" to her case for erotic legitimacy. The multiple, conflicting attributions of voice and speaker, author and subject, coexisting within this poem illuminate the complex ways that prosopopoeia achieved its rhetorical effects. It depended as a figure on the counterfeiting of a historical identity in ways that were persuasive yet also rhetorically manufactured, illustrating Gavin Alexander's description of prosopopoeia as "lifelike but not alive."³⁰ Holding the reader in suspension between counterfeiting identity and identifying counterfeits, such fictions of production were intimately concerned with the reputation of their subjects and speakers. Reputation provided both the grounds upon which a recognizable attribution could be made, as well as the opportunity of remaking this identity through the imitation of voice.

The scandal of the affair between Vavasour and Oxford continued to reverberate in Elizabethan court culture, with Vavasour's uncle, Sir Thomas Knyvet, continuing to defend her and eventually, in 1583, challenging Oxford to a duel.³¹ A second poem is associated with Vavasour in three separate manuscripts: Folger MS V.a.89 and Bodleian MS Rawlinson poet.

85, both subscribed “vavaser,” and British Library MS Harley 6910, subscribed “finis qd La B to N.” As Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson note, at least one contemporary reference exists to Vavasour as Baviser, meaning that “La B” could be Anne Vavasour, with “N” standing in for an unknown person.³² This poem presents the voice of the female speaker without a frame. She addresses her beloved directly to assure him of her constant love, despite the feigned distance that she has assumed to disguise her true feelings at court:

Though I seme straunge my freend, be thou not so
Do not anoye thy selfe with sullen will
My harte hath vowed although my tongue say no
To rest thyne owne in freendly liking still.
Thou seest me liue amonge the Linceus eyes
That pries and spies into vary thought of mynd
Thou knowest righte well what sorrowes may arise
If once they chaunce our secreat loves to fynd
Then know'st right well that once I made an oath
To shilde my selfe in shrowde of honest shame
And when thou list make tryall of my troath
So that thou saue the honoure of my name
We seely dames that false suspect do feare
And lye wthin the mouth of euey Lorde
Muste in or harts a seacreat meaning beare
Far from the show that outwardlye we make
Then thinke not strange although that I be coy
To cloake my sad conceipts wth smillinge cheere
Let not my jesture show wherein I ioy
Nor by my lookes lett not my loue appeare
And wheare I like I list not vaunte my loue
Where I desyre there must I fayne debate
One hath my hand another hath my gloue
But he my hart whome most I seeme to hate
Thus farwell freend I will continew straunge
They shall not fynd by word or writting ought
Let this suffice my vow shall neuer change
as for the rest I leaue it to thy thought
finis qd La B to N.³³

The two prosopopoeiae, the complaint “Sittinge alone upon my thought in melancholye moode” and the lyric “Thoughe I seme straunge my freend,” are linked: in the complaint, the narrator observes the speaker “Clad all in colour of a vowe and covered with a vayle”; in the lyric the speaker refers twice to her heart’s “vowe” and attests “that once I made an oath / To shilde my selfe in shrowde of honest shame.” The Bodleian and Folger manuscript miscellanies both have transcriptions of the two Vavasour poems, indicating that their prosopopoeic identifications were generative rather than restrictive of the production of a female voice. The dramatization of Vavasour’s voice at one point of a lived erotic relationship is repeated in another, pointing to the availability of prosopopoeia to produce and perform different versions of female erotic subjectivity across the affair’s trajectory.

The generative potential of prosopopoeia exemplified in the Vavasour lyrics extended to a second tranche of prosopopoeic identifications connected with this scandal and its aftermath. John Soowthern’s collection of poetry *Pandora*, published in 1584, contains poems attributed to Oxford’s wife, Anne Cecil de Vere, followed by a sonnet attributed to Elizabeth I. The Vavasour/Oxford scandal was nested in a broader narrative circulating in the Elizabethan court concerning Oxford and his wife. Anne Cecil and Edward de Vere were married in 1571 but estranged from 1575, as Oxford accused her of bearing an illegitimate child and used their relationship as a means of expressing his dissatisfaction with the support he received from his father-in-law, William Cecil, in pursuing his interests at court.³⁴ By the end of 1581, however, letters show that the couple were reconciled and living together; Anne de Vere opens her letter on December 12, 1581, with “My very good Lord, I most hartily thank you for your love” and hopes that “better fortune will haue us mete togethr.”³⁵ Published in 1584, after this reconciliation, Soowthern’s poems in the Countess of Oxford’s voice mourn the death of their first son, Lord Bulbecke, buried on May 9, 1583. Consisting of four sonnets and two quatrains, these poems follow Soowthern’s distinctive poetics by combining passages of translation from the poems of Philippe Desportes with sections of original verse, alongside additional unconventional features including the use of arrhythmic meters, idiosyncratic rhyme schemes, and abbreviated forms of proper nouns. Although the poems have been read as genuine by some critics, their highly unusual poetics indicate that it is more likely that these were exercises in prosopopoeia written by Soowthern.³⁶ In assuming the Countess of Oxford’s identity, Soowthern circulates, in print, a female poetic voice which lays claim to legitimacy as wife of the Earl of Oxford and as mother of Oxford’s heir. Rather than the kind of secret vow

that is covertly publicized by “vavaser,” this is an open statement of possession and power in a volume dedicated to Oxford and circulated alongside a poem attributed to the queen.³⁷ Similarly, the poem attributed to Elizabeth, “Epitaph, made by the Queenes Maiestie, at the death of the Princesse of Espinoye,” assumes Elizabeth’s voice for strategic effect. The queen’s voice is ventriloquized by Soowthern to mourn the Protestant Princess of Épinoy, Philippine-Christine de Lalaing, who was renowned for her courage in battle for leading the defense of the town of Tournai against the armies of Alexandre Farnèse.³⁸ From a Protestant perspective, Soowthern’s assumption of Elizabeth’s voice in her epitaph for de Lalaing compares unfavorably to Elizabeth’s own hesitancy over action in the Netherlands and provides a suggestive response for the queen herself.³⁹ This group of interrelated prosopopoeiae, assuming the identities of Anne Vavasour, Anne Cecil de Vere, and Elizabeth I, uses attribution to indicate voice as much as authorship. I am suggesting that these poems were circulated and received as fictions of women’s textual production within a broader culture of prosopopoeic practice. For Anne Vavasour and Anne de Vere, these fictions circulated to restore different kinds of erotic and legal legitimacy in the face of courtly rumor and scandal. For Elizabeth, the use of her voice was an admonitory projection of a preferred model of political practice in the interests of militant Protestantism. Forming a constellation of linked, counterfeit identities, these prosopopoeiae generated multiple and diverse versions of female authorship, produced in the territory between the real and the fictional.

Soowthern’s production of Elizabeth as speaker in the sonnet attributed to her draws on a decade-long precedent of prosopopoeiae associated with the dramatic life and love affairs of her cousin, Mary Stuart. Most notable of these were the scandalous casket poems, a sequence of amorous sonnets spoken by a queen and professing her devotion to her married beloved, first published as part of George Buchanan’s *Ane Detectioun* in 1571 and circulating in five editions before 1578.⁴⁰ The *Detectioun* carefully frames these poems as evidence of Mary’s complicity in the murder of her first husband Darnley and her subsequent marriage to Bothwell. The sonnets are prefaced with a lengthy assemblage of documents, beginning with two prose tracts by Buchanan, a narration, and a forensic oration, alongside other material related to the case against Bothwell and Mary including a memorandum detailing the discovery of the casket, a version of one of the marriage contracts found within it, and the indictment of Bothwell at his April 1567 trial in the assize court. The reader encounters the female-voiced sonnets as the final evidence of the case made in Buchanan’s *detectio*: a projection of the

queen's love for Bothwell, for whom, the speaker states, she has sacrificed everything: "my sonne, my honour and my lyif, / My contry, my subiects, my soule al subdewit."⁴¹ The marginal annotations of the only surviving manuscript copy of the poems, transcribed from *Ane Detectioun*, indicate in no uncertain terms that the reader considers the speaker of these poems to be Mary Stuart.⁴² For example, in the third sonnet, when the speaker declares her affection for her lover despite her friends' views—"moy maugre tous les miens vous port affection"—the annotator underlines "maugre tous les miens" and notes "the queen declare that she wald by therll bothwells in despyt of god and and the world." Later in the sequence the annotations become more heated, marking the speaker's desire to take her own life for fear of losing her beloved with "enugh lies this prouit that he had lyn with her befor that tym." These annotations provide evidence of one reader's attribution of prosopopoeic identity to the voice in these sonnets; all sixteen marginalia consistently identify the speaker with the queen and the events of the sequence with an imagined narrative of her love affair with Bothwell.

As we have seen, however, the truth-effects surrounding the female speaker within the text do not mean that the historical figure of Mary Stuart was necessarily read as their author. Prosopopoeia has a more complex relationship with history than this, creating persuasive fictions that the reader can assess and weigh, aware of both their claims to "truth" and status as fiction. The rhetorical figure is put to a different strategic use here: a counterfeiting of identity, not for reputational recovery nor admonitory instruction, but for inflicting reputational damage. James E. Philips identifies Elizabeth's covert transmission of the *Detectioun* in print as a kind of "semi-publicity" against her cousin, a means of circulating propaganda damaging to Mary without officially authorizing its publication.⁴³ If the figure of prosopopoeia had a repressive function for the early modern woman writer, one would imagine that the circulation of the casket sonnets would have had devastating consequences for Mary, Queen of Scots. Yet the evidence shows the contrary. The effect of these misattributed poems was surprisingly generative for the woman apparently most damaged by them, Mary herself, as she sought to repair her reputation through her own circulation of a very different set of texts under her signature. In this move, she used the same medium, print, in order to construct a competing version of her voice to that produced by Buchanan's text. The generative potential of prosopopoeia, and its use for strategic effect found in the poems clustered around the Oxford scandal, here takes on a new valency, as a woman writer can be seen to use prosopopoeia in a bid to manipulate public perception.

In 1574, immediately after the first three editions of *Ane Detectioun* were circulated, John Leslie's *Libri Duo: Quorum vno, Piae Afflicti Animi Consolationes, diuinaque remedia* was published containing a devotional meditation and a sonnet attributed in the text to Mary Stuart.⁴⁴ Leslie's manuscript was written in the Tower of London following his arrest for involvement in the Ridolfi plot.⁴⁵ Two manuscript presentation copies survive in Leslie's hand, both with dedicatory epistles to Mary; her hundred-line meditation and following sonnet were written in response to his manuscript, and their texts were published together in *Libri Duo*.⁴⁶ Introduced as a meditation made by the queen upon receiving a book of divine consolations written by the Bishop of Ross, the meditation mobilizes one of the mainstays of devotional practice to present Mary's own treatise on the vanity of worldly things. Within the meditation, the speaker's voice dovetails with that of David, voicing "the wise sayings of the King who is most prudent" in order to submit herself to God's mercy, goodness, and love, "Having in my heart your love inscribed / Which I will offer in the place of my merit." At the meditation's conclusion, the penitent speaker identifies herself through an anagram that is then decoded as her name: "sa vertue m'attire, / marie stvvarte" [Your virtue draws me / Mary Stuart].⁴⁷ The conventional language of the meditation and its impassioned final colloquy take on a new meaning, reinforcing through this second identification of voice the broader context of Mary Stuart's personal circumstances as penitent sovereign. Not only is this played out in the meditation, it is repeated in the sonnet that follows, also signed with an anagram of Mary's name, although this time not explicitly decoded; it finishes "Va, tv meriteras" [Go, you will deserve].⁴⁸ In circulating a sonnet under the queen's name, Leslie's text explicitly redeploys the form that has been used to brutally destroy her reputation in print in Buchanan's earlier text. Further, just as Buchanan prefaces the casket sonnets with a body of damaging material to the queen, so does Leslie's text preface her sonnet with a body of devotional material that frames the poem's subject as voice of ideal devotion, deserving of God's grace:

L'ire de Dieu par le sang ne s'appaise
 De boeufs, ny boucs, expandu sur l'autel,
 Ny par encens, ou Sacrifice tel,
 Le Souuerain ne reçoit aucun aise.
 Qui veult, Seigneur, faire œuure qui te plaise,
 Il faut qu'il ayt sa foy en l'Immortel,
 Auec espoir, charité au mortel,

Et bien faisant que ton loz il ne taise,
 C'est vn esprit en oraison constant,
 Humble & deuot, en vn corps chaste estant.
 O Tout-puissant, sois moy si fauorable,
 Que pour tousiours ces graces dans mon cœur
 Puissant rester à ta gloire & honneur!
 VA, TV MERITERAS.⁴⁹

[The wrath of God is not appeased by the blood
 Of bulls, nor goats, splashed on the altar,
 Nor by incense, nor such sacrifice,
 Does the Sovereign receive any comfort.
 What matters, Lord, is to do what pleases you,
 One must have faith in the Everlasting,
 With hope, love for people,
 And doing good so that your law is not hidden.
 The only offering that is pleasing to you,
 Is a mind in constant prayer,
 Humble and devout, being in a chaste body.
 O All-powerful, show such favor to me
 That forever these graces in my heart
 Powerfully remain, to your glory and honour.
 GO, YOU WILL DESERVE.]

There is a remarkable confidence in this poem, instructing its reader in the ways in which the subject might please the Lord, through faith, hope, love for others, and right actions, as well as the offering of “a mind in constant prayer / Humble and devout, being in a chaste body.” Although the speaker attributes the power to bestow such virtues to God, she positions her heart at the sonnet’s close as a powerful, exemplary receptacle of God’s grace in the service of his glory and honor. Nothing could be further from the disgraced, impassioned plainant of the casket sonnets, whose unchaste body is the vehicle for the kind of exorbitant passion for the secular beloved that characterizes erotic complaint.⁵⁰

The circulation of this sonnet, in print, signals the queen’s refusal to be characterized through a single prosopopoeic position. Her signatures at the close of both of these poems recruit the conventions of naming to a specific devotional and political program and her own construction of a poetic voice. This move amplifies the generative potential of prosopopoeia,

marshaling prosopopoeic identity for personal gain and political purchase in rival formations of fictional impersonation available to both imitators and owners of signatures. The knowing and strategic manipulation of reputation through poetic voice here is simply a different manifestation of a broader cultural tradition through which women's historical identities were constructed, dramatized, and transmitted for the reader's assessment through rhetorical figures: sites of both convention and reinvention.

Prosopopoeiae were crucial in the manufacture of reputation, positive and negative, in the early modern period and generated a range of writing that imagined female textual identity as diverse, rhetorically sophisticated, socially astute in the pursuit of self-interest, and politically engaged. These texts' persuasive success depended upon the degree to which they convincingly occupied the speaking position of their imagined female subjects, recruiting rhetorical truth-effects to speak in a way that allowed readers to occupy a position of what Mark Seltzer refers to as "half-credence"—a kind of suspended disbelief in which the roles of author and speaker might be seen to coexist in productive tension.⁵¹ The complex histories of naming and attribution in these texts and their paratexts point to the central place that prosopopoeia had in early modern formations of female authorship, female voice, and women's writing. Rather than foreclosing opportunities for women, the examples discussed here suggest that prosopopoeia was a generative mode, continuous with authorship and embedded within its practices. The circulation of counterfeit poetic identities created a chorus of female voices as textual models, available to male and female agents alike, and might be seen to comprise a rich new body of texts through which women's voices were produced, circulated, and received in the early modern period. Leaving such texts on the perimeters of literary history impoverishes our understanding of early modern women, writing, and textual reception, and overlooks the ways in which print, scribal, and oral cultures intersected in sixteenth-century England. The significance of prosopopoeia as a rhetorical figure extended far beyond the humanist schoolroom and the male writers trained in its complexities. Its diverse fictions enabled rather than restricted the productions of the English woman writer and need to be factored into models of her place in formations of English literary history.

37

Notes

- 1 Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.
- 2 Marie-Louise Coolahan, “Transnational Reception and Early Modern Women’s ‘Lost’ Texts,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7 (2012): 261–70.
- 3 For a suggestive recent consideration of the function of voice in early modern women’s writing, see Jennifer Richards, “The Voice of Anne Askew,” *Journal of the Northern Renaissance* 9 (2017): 70–85.
- 4 Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke, introduction to “*This Double Voice*”: *Gender and Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Clarke and Clarke (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), 6.
- 5 See, for example, Josephine Roberts, “The Phallacies of Authorship: Reconstructing the Texts of Early Women Writers,” in *Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Susan D. Amussen and Adele Seeff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 38–53.
- 6 Marcy L. North, *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11–12.
- 7 Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, eds. *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), xii–xiv.
- 8 See John Soowthern, *Pandora, The Musyque of the beautie of his Mistresse Diana* (London, 1584), “Epitaph, made by the Queenes Maiestie, at the death of the Princesse of Espinoye,” sig. D1r; *The Neue Testamente*, trans. Myles Coverdale (London, 1538), in British Library (hereafter BL), shelfmark C.45.a.13, fol. 9v.
- 9 See, for example, Helen Smith, “*Grossly Material Things*”: *Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Julie Crawford, *Mediatrice: Women, Politics, and Literary Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sarah C. E. Ross, *Women, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Patricia Pender, ed., *Gender, Authorship, and Early Modern Women’s Collaboration* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- 10 Patricia Phillippy, introduction to *A History of Early Modern Women’s Writing*, ed. Phillippy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.
- 11 Phillippy, 20.
- 12 North, *Anonymous Renaissance*, 15.
- 13 Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetorike* (London, 1588), sig. G2v.
- 14 Puttenham lists prosopopoeia with other figures of dissimulation: “Hypoptyposis, or the counterfeit representation,” “Prosopographia, or the counterfeit countenance,” “Prosopopoeia, or the counterfeit impersonation,” “Chronographia, or the counterfeit time,” “Topographia, or the counterfeit place,” and “Pragmatographia, of the counterfeit action.” George Puttenham, *The Arte of Englishe Poesie* (London, 1589), 320–27. See also Gavin Alexander, “Prosopopoeia: The Speaking Figure,” in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97–114, at 114.
- 15 Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 80.

- 16 Enterline, 83.
- 17 English *heroides* include John Shepely, *Hyppolitus ovidianae Phaedra respondens* (Oxford, 1586); Michael Drayton, *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (London, 1597); and manuscript exchanges such as the anonymous “Sir Phillipe Sidney to the Lady Penelope Rich, the Lady Penelope Rich to Sir Phillipe Sidney,” discussed in Josephine A. Roberts, “The Imaginary Epistles of Sir Philip Sidney and Lady Penelope Rich,” *English Literary Renaissance* 15, no. 1 (1985): 59–77. For a discussion of Isabella Whitney’s vernacular use of the form, see Danielle Clarke, ed., *Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney, and Aemelia Lanyer: Renaissance Women Poets* (London: Penguin, 2000), xiii–xiv.
- 18 Illuminating discussions of individual poems with complex attributions to early modern women in prosopopeia can be found in Danielle Clarke, “‘In sort as she it sung’: Spenser’s ‘Doleful Lay’ and the Construction of Female Authorship,” *Criticism* 42, no. 4 (2000): 451–68; and Richards, “The Voice of Anne Askew.” An important earlier consideration of the production of voice can be found in the collection *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996); as well as Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 19 Roberts, “Phallacies of Authorship,” 49.
- 20 Steven W. May, “The Poems of Edward De Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex,” *Studies in Philology* 77, no. 5 (1980): 5–130. All subsequent references to this poem (38–39) are to this edition.
- 21 May, 79–81.
- 22 Washington, D.C., Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.a.89; BL Harley MS 7392.
- 23 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson poet. 85; Dublin, Marsh’s Library, MS 183. In the Bodleian manuscript, “and Mrs Anne Vauesor” is crossed out but the ascription is clearly visible. See also Ruth Hughey, ed., *The Arundel Harington Manuscript of Tudor Poetry*, 2 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1960), 1:215–16. In the Arundel Harington manuscript, the poem is introduced with an annotation, although not in Sir John Harington’s hand: “The best verse that ever th’author made” (May, “Poems,” 79); see also Steven W. May, *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: The Poems and Their Contexts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 269–83. Ilona Bell notes that the preposition “by” could indicate authorship or “a male-authored poem prompted by a woman’s presence nearby.” Ilona Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80.
- 24 The scandal is covered in detail in B. M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford: 1550–1604* (London: John Murray, 1928). See also E. K. Chambers, *Sir Henry Lee: An Elizabethan Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 150–63; and more recently Sue Simpson, *Sir Henry Lee (1533–1611): Elizabethan Courtier* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 145–54.
- 25 Lord Henry Howard accused Oxford of planning “to carry away Nan Vaviser . . . a 12 monthe [ago] when he thought hir first to haue bene with child” (London, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], PRO, SP12/151/118–9).
- 26 TNA, HMC Hastings, MS II, 29. See Chambers, *Sir Henry Lee*, 155–59.

- 27 Ward, *Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, 206–38. Oxford’s alienation from the court may also have derived from his involvement with Catholicism, which he professed to the queen in 1580, betraying Henry Howard, Francis Southwell, and Charles Arundel with whom he had professed Catholicism in 1576.
- 28 May notes that this description flatters Oxford, who was thirty when the poem was first circulated (“Poems,” 81).
- 29 John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and “Female Complaint”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 11–19.
- 30 Alexander, “Prosopopoeia,” 114.
- 31 Ward, *Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, 230.
- 32 Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, eds., *Early Modern Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 541.
- 33 My copytext is BL Harley MS 6910, fol. 145r–v; all subsequent references are to this transcription.
- 34 Ward, *Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, 206–11.
- 35 BL Lansdowne MS 104/63, fol. 166r.
- 36 For critics arguing for the attribution to Anne Cecil de Vere, see Ellen Moody, “Six Elegaic Poems, Possibly by Anne Cecil de Vere, Countess of Oxford,” *English Literary Renaissance* 19, no. 2 (1989): 152–70; Louse Schleiner, *Tudor and Stuart Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 85–93; and Kim Walker, *Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 61–62. Arguments against the attribution are put forward in Steven May, “The Countess of Oxford’s Sonnets: A Caveat,” *English Language Notes* 29, no. 4 (1992): 9–19; and Rosalind Smith, “The Sonnets of the Countess of Oxford and Elizabeth I: Translations from Desportes,” *Notes and Queries*, no. 239 (1994): 446–50. As May persuasively observes, both women would have had to imitate Soowthern’s poetics exactly to be the authors of these poems; in Elizabeth’s case, then abandoning that poetics in the remainder of her writing.
- 37 Soowthern, *Pandora*, sig. A2r.
- 38 Léon van der Essen, *Alexandre Farnèse, Prince de Parme, Gouverneur Général des Pays Bas*, 3 vols. (Bruxelles: Librairie Nationale d’Art et d’Histoire, 1934), 3:12–38.
- 39 For an account of Puttenham’s hostile response to Soowthern’s appropriation of Elizabeth’s voice and his own circulation of her poetry, see Rosalind Smith, *Sonnets and the English Woman Writer, 1560–1621: The Politics of Absence* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 70–77.
- 40 George Buchanan, *Ane Detectioun of the duinges of Mary Quene of Scottes* (London, 1571). The 1571 English *Detectioun* was released in two issues, followed by a 1572 Scottish edition from the press of Robert Lekprevik, and a 1572 French edition published at La Rochelle. It was reprinted again in 1577 and 1578. Another Latin translation of French verses is prefaced: “A translation of certain verses first written in French that had been sent by the most Serene Queen of Scotland to the most Serene Queen Elizabeth of England as a pledge of mutual friendship, together with a ring of excellent workmanship that had a striking and extraordinary diamond,” reprinted in Thomas Chaloner, *De Republica Anglorum* (London, 1579), 353. The preface to the Latin translation explicitly does not ascribe authorship to Mary—they are described as

- sent rather than written—and the poem is therefore excluded from discussion here. I thank Brenda Hosington for her translation of the Latin; the full translation, alongside an image of the Latin poem in Chaloner's 1579 text, can be found at *Material Cultures of Early Modern Women's Writing Digital Archive*, ed. Rosalind Smith and Patricia Pender, c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/emwrn/index.php?p=diamond.
- 41 Buchanan, *Ane Detectioun*, sig. R4v.
 - 42 Cambridge University Library, MS Oo.7.47, fols. 46r–49r. All subsequent references are to this source. For a description of the manuscript and the dossier of materials in which it appears, see Peter Davidson, “The Casket Sonnets: New Evidence Concerning Mary, Queen of Scots,” *History Scotland* 1 (Winter 2001): 28–34.
 - 43 James E. Phillips, *Images of a Queen: Mary Stuart in Sixteenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 62.
 - 44 John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, “Piae Afflicti Animi Consolationes Divinaeque Remedia,” in *Libri Duo: Quorum uno, Piae Afflicti Animi Consolationes, diuinaeque remedia. Altero, Animi Tranquilli Mvnnimentum et conservatio, continentur* (London, 1574), fols. 38v–42r.
 - 45 See Pamela Robinson, “John Leslie's ‘Libri Duo’: Manuscripts belonging to Mary Queen of Scots?,” in *Order and Connexion: Studies in Bibliography and Book History*, ed. R. C. Alston (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 63–76, at 63.
 - 46 London, Lambeth Place Library, MS 566; and BL Add. MS 48180.
 - 47 Leslie, *Libri Duo*, fols. 38v, 40r, my trans.
 - 48 Leslie, fol. 40r. The translation of this sonnet is by Dr. Mike Nolan, reproduced from Rosalind Smith, ed., “Meditation on the Inconstancy and Vanity of the World, Sonnet ‘L'ire de Dieu,’ and Poem ‘A L'Evesque de Rosse,’” in *Material Cultures of Early Modern Women's Writing Digital Archive*, ed. Smith and Pender, at c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/emwrn/index.php?p=meditation.
 - 49 Leslie, *Libri Duo*, fol. 40r–v.
 - 50 For an extended discussion of the role of prosopopoeia in Mary Stuart's religious poetry, see Rosalind Smith, “Prosopopoeia, Gender, and Religion: The Poetry of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots,” in *The Routledge Companion to Women, Sex, and Gender in the Early British Colonial World*, ed. Kimberly Anne Coles and Eve Keller (London: Routledge, 2018), 170–88.
 - 51 Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2011), 6.